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ABSTRACT

Intended for parents and based on the premise that parents are their children's first and most important teachers, this booklet is a distillation of findings from the 1984 report of the Commission on Reading, "Becoming a Nation of Readers." The introduction reiterates the commission's conclusions (1) that a parent is a child's first tutor in unraveling the puzzle of written language; (2) that parents should read to preschool children and informally teach them about reading and writing; and (3) that parents should support school-aged children's continued growth as readers. Chapter 1 defines reading as the process of constructing meaning from written texts, a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information. Chapter 2, on the preschool years, focuses on talking to the young child, reading aloud to the preschooler, and teaching children about written language. The third chapter, on beginning reading, counsels parents on what to look for in good beginning reading programs in schools, and how to help the child with reading at home. The fourth chapter, on developing readers and making reading an integral part of learning, offers suggestions for helping the child succeed in school and for encouraging reading for fun. The afterword calls on teachers, publishers, and school personnel, as well as parents, to participate actively in creating a literate society. The booklet concludes with a list of organizations that provide practical help or publications for parents. (NKA)

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Becoming a Nation of Readers

What Parents Can Do

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Becoming a Nation of Readers

What Parents Can Do

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Foreword

A parent reading to a child: It is an age-old image, one that conjures up the spirit of learning as passed from one generation to the next.

Yet it is more than imagery. Parents are their children's first and most important teachers. Children begin learning to read at an early age, when parents first use words and images to describe and interpret their world. As explained in the recent Department of Education publication, *What Works*: "The best way for parents to help their children to become better readers is to read to them."

Because parents so powerfully influence the reading development of their children, we hope that many parents will benefit from this booklet. It is a distillation of findings from *Becoming a Nation of Readers*,* the influential 1984 report of the Commission on Reading. That commission performed a remarkable service by bringing together a vast body of research and analysis on how reading develops and on what conditions foster effective reading development. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* established a benchmark for educators, policymakers, and the public at large and helped create a new national commitment to reading.

The need for such commitment has never been greater. Despite a record level of public spending on education, there remains an unacceptably high level of illiteracy and semiliteracy among our young people. Though the great majority of American students possess basic reading skills, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, nearly 40 percent of 13-year-olds lack such "intermediate" skills as the ability to locate information within paragraphs or to make generalizations based on what they have read. Youngsters lacking these skills have difficulty reading newspapers and understanding their textbooks. More serious are the challenges they will face later when confronted by the workplace of an Information Age. Children who cannot read fluently today will simply not have access to the responsible jobs of the future.

Beyond these practical arguments, there is another and possibly more important reason for guiding young people toward a life of reading. Literature is a treasure trove to which reading is the key. Poetry, biography, novels, and essays are the birthright of every child. Children who miss out on them because of poor schooling, or parental inattention, or too much television, are children deprived of a rich and irreplaceable heritage. In his recent report on elementary education, entitled *First Lessons*, Secretary William Bennett wrote that teaching children to read is the "sublime and most solemn responsibility" of elementary schools. That same responsibility—and the same sense of sublime achievement—should be shared by parents as well.

Although the pages that follow are brief, they represent whole lifetimes of work. The Commission on Reading brought together the most distinguished scholars in this field, and this is a succinct statement of their conclusions relating to the role of parents. As this booklet was being drafted, members of the Commission and other reading authorities helped to shape it. So parents who follow its recommendations as they set about the task of helping their children can be confident that

*R.C. Anderson, E.H. Heibert, J.A. Scott and I.A.G. Wilkinson, *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*, 1985. Further references to this work will say *BNR*.

they are being guided by the best information and advice that are available on this subject.

Parents have few responsibilities more important or more rewarding than helping their children to learn. We believe that this brief booklet will be a valuable asset in that quest.

Chester E. Finn, Jr.
Assistant Secretary
Office of Educational
Research and Improvement

Acknowledgments

This booklet draws heavily from *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. As such, my first debt is to all the members of the Commission who worked so diligently at reviewing and synthesizing the research on reading and practice.

Particular thanks go to the Commissioners—Dr. Isabel Beck, Professor and Senior Scientist at the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh; Dr. Jere Brophy, Professor and Co-director of the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University; Dr. Jeanne Chall, Professor and Director of the Reading Laboratory at Harvard University; Dr. Robert Glaser, Professor and Director of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh; Dr. Lenore Ringler, Professor at New York University; Dr. Dorothy Strickland, Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University; and Monte Penney, former Senior Research Associate at the Department of Education, who painstakingly reviewed drafts of this booklet so that it would reflect the quality and balance achieved in the original. Their advice was invaluable.

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I would also like to acknowledge the often-unrecognized efforts of all the members of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) and the former National Institute of Education who have worked diligently to ensure excellence in research. They have supported and nurtured the creativity of the researchers who together have produced the body of knowledge allowing us to make these recommendations.

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All but one of the photos in this booklet were provided by the American Library Association (ALA), which recently ran a photo contest on the theme A Nation of Readers. The collection of pictures from that contest is now being exhibited in libraries across the country. I am grateful to the ALA for granting permission to use them here. I am also grateful to the American Federation of Teachers for their photo contribution.

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Introduction

As a parent, you want your children to succeed in school and at learning to read. Contrary to popular opinion, learning to read does not begin in school. Learning to read begins at home. Just as your children naturally learned to talk by following your example, they may naturally learn a great deal about reading before they ever set foot inside a school building.

You want to do the right things to help your child get off to a good start. But you may wonder what these "right things" are. To answer some of your questions, the U.S. Department of Education has taken an active role in finding out exactly what we know and can do about helping children succeed. In addition to funding research, the Department has reported on that research in such documents as *What Works* and *First Lessons*.[1] Even more to the point, the Department created the Commission on Reading, a group of ten experts who spent over a year reviewing what is known about reading. Reporting in *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, they concluded that

> **a parent is a child's first tutor in unraveling the fascinating puzzle of written language. A parent is a child's one enduring source of faith that somehow, sooner or later, he or she will become a good reader.** (*BNR*, p. 28)

But the Commission on Reading didn't stop there. They suggested two things parents could do to ensure that their children got the best possible start:

- ***Parents should read to preschool children and informally teach them about reading and writing.*** Reading to children, discussing stories and experiences with them, and—with a light touch—helping them learn letters and words are practices that are consistently associated with eventual success in reading. (*BNR*, p. 117)
- ***Parents should support school-aged children's continued growth as readers.*** Parents of children who become successful readers monitor their children's progress in school, become involved in school programs, support homework, buy their children books or take them to libraries, encourage reading as a free time activity, and place reasonable limits on such activities as TV viewing. (*BNR*, p. 117)

This booklet, a companion to *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, highlights those messages from the report that are important to parents. The booklet lists ideas and sources of information for home activities, based on research, that will improve reading achievement. It also describes some of what parents should look for in their children's school programs.

The booklet discusses the needs of preschoolers, beginning readers, and developing readers separately. However, parents of children in one age group will benefit from reading the other sections too, since reading is a skill that develops, sometimes unevenly, throughout a lifetime. Understanding what reading is, and its likely course of development before and after your children's current stage, will help you understand the "big picture."

Chapter 1

What Is Reading?

Many people believe that reading is just the process of turning printed words into their spoken equivalents. However, this view of reading represents only part of the picture. Years of research have shown reading to be far more than just knowing how sounds correspond to letters and words.

Skilled readers do much more than just turn printed words into spoken ones. They use their knowledge of the world, of how information is organized on a page, and their awareness of whether something makes sense to guide their efforts to construct meaning. For example, children faced with the sentence,

Mommy and Daddy gave the waiter a tip.

might be able to say the words in the sentence. But if those children had only eaten at a fast food restaurant and had never seen a waiter or observed their parents leaving money on the table, they may completely fail to understand the meaning of the sentence.

Consequently, for all readers, beginning or skilled, the capacity to understand a written message or text depends as much on experience with the world (including books) outside of school as on the formal education provided by the school. Hence the fundamental importance of home-based experiences.

To reflect this expanded idea of what reading is, the Commission defines reading as

> **the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information.** (*BNR*, p. 7)

Becoming a Nation of Readers goes on to describe skilled reading in five ways:

- Reading is a *constructive process*. According to the report, "Good readers skillfully integrate information in the text with what they already know." (*BNR*, p. 8) Since no piece of text can possibly tell readers everything they need to know, readers must "fill in the blanks" from their experience.

- Reading must be *fluent*. "Readers must be able to [recognize] words quickly and accurately so that this process can coordinate fluidly with the process of constructing the meaning of the text." (*BNR*, p. 11.)

- Reading must be *strategic*. "Skilled readers are flexible. How they read depends upon the complexity of the text, their familiarity with the topic, and their purpose for reading." (*BNR*, p. 13) They will read difficult things slowly and with care; they might skim an advertisement; and they will probably fly through an exciting story.

- Reading requires *motivation*, "one of the keys to learning to read." (*BNR*, p. 14) This motivation develops from the recognition that reading can be interesting and informative.

• Skilled reading is *a lifelong pursuit.* "Reading, like playing a musical instrument, is not something that is mastered once and for all at a certain age. Rather, it is a skill that continues to improve through practice." (*BNR,* p. 16)

Because reading is a complex skill that develops over a lifetime, teachers alone are not enough. Learning to read begins when you talk with and listen to your children, and especially when you read with them and let them see you reading for your own enjoyment. In doing just those few things, you teach your children the most important lessons about reading.

Chapter 2

The Preschool Years

During the preschool years, children develop at an extraordinary rate. Each day's experiences, however familiar to adults, can be fresh and exciting for curious preschoolers. Although your children's incessant curiosity might be aggravating, especially at the end of a long day, it provides an opportunity for you to help your children connect daily experiences with words. Tying language to the world your children know allows them to go beyond that world to explore new ideas. This ability to use language and to reason is crucial for reading achievement. Not only are there abundant opportunities for a parent to help children develop language, but these opportunities often occur naturally and easily.

Talking with Your Preschoolers

You can deepen your children's understanding of the world by talking with them about the experiences and memories you share. Even as you stand in the kitchen trying to get dinner ready, you can talk about things that are happening. For example, when your 2- or 3-year-old "helps" by taking out all the pots, you could ask your child which is the biggest, which is red, or whether the one you are cooking in is the same as any of those on the floor.

No matter where you live, your home and community can provide a rich source of experiences for you to share with your children. These experiences can be simple, like exploring your own home; or they may be elaborate, like taking your child on a trip to the museum. Either way, these experiences can be rich in the history of your family and the traditions you value.

Two things are essential if you want to capitalize on these experiences:

- First, the experiences should be varied. Varied experiences help children develop different sorts of knowledge. Like adults, children are stimulated by novel experiences. Providing the occasional trip outside of the daily routine can go a long way. Such a trip may be as simple as spending a day in the country if you live in the city or vice versa. Similarly, don't overlook the resources that may be available in your town. The library, zoo, and museum may be gateways to new worlds far removed from your community.

- Second, the experiences should be surrounded by talk. Some parents are "teaching" constantly as they put into words the experiences they are sharing with their children. Talkative parents call attention to the many things they pass by, saying things like, "We're going across a bridge now. What is below the bridge?" They might ask, "Why do you think we have bridges?" Then they may tell their children about their early experiences with bridges. They may talk about building bridges. Talkative parents give children opportunities to talk too, encouraging their children to think and talk about the world around them as often as possible. Language frames the world the child knows; the richer the language, the richer the child's world. Especially with a small child, it is better to say too much than too little.

Even more importantly, help your children talk about the experiences in ways that extend their vocabulary and understanding of the world. For example, when walking down the street, almost all 2- or 3-year-olds will stop to collect leaves. Ask the children questions. "Which leaves look the same? Which ones are different? Do you know anything else that grows on trees? Which of these things do we eat?" Questions such as these help children begin to compare, contrast, and classify things in the world around them. The important point is to ask questions that require more than a simple yes or no response.

"What if" questions are also important. You might ask "What might happen if we crossed the street in the middle of the block?" Or, "What would happen if you swallowed a watermelon seed?" These kinds of questions provide opportunities for playful thinking and are important in stimulating a child's imagination.

Children's endless "why?" questions often seem to try the patience of all of us, but answering them patiently can help children learn how the world works. Even when you say "I don't know, let's look it up" in answer to a question like "Why is the grass green?" you have shown them that books serve as a resource for answering questions.

As children become more independent, new opportunities to learn and talk about the world arise. If given a chance, children quickly learn to recognize the details they will need when they talk about an experience they did not share with you. They begin to recall and categorize information, thereby building and enlarging their capacity to remember. They will also begin to use language as a way of sharing important feelings and thoughts.

Parents are often frustrated when their children do not adequately explain experiences they have had away from home. On the other hand, it is natural for children not to recognize that they may have left out important information. Still, a weary parent may be tempted to stop listening. A better response, however, is to ask your children to explain certain elements of the story so you can understand it better. That way they will learn how to tell a complete story and will also learn how highly you value their ability to speak lucidly.

Reading Aloud with Your Preschoolers

While connecting experience to language is an important foundation for learning to read, giving your children direct contact with books is equally important. In fact, the Commission on Reading noted that

> **the single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children.** (*BNR*, p. 23)

When adults read aloud, children quickly learn that a book is a wonderful thing. When an adult happily reads aloud to children, and reads stories that delight both the adult and the children, the experience can be magical. Often adults relive the joys of stories that were important in their own childhood and pass those special stories on to the next generation. The children bask in the warmth and intimacy of sharing a book with a loved adult. Even if children do not fully understand the story or poem being read, they may enjoy simply hearing the tone and cadence

of the adult's voice, and they will incidentally and naturally learn a great deal about the nature of stories and the structure of language.

There is more to reading to children than just saying the words. Reading aloud is a social event, a shared activity in which children are encouraged to ask questions and talk about a story. A story may be the jumping off point for great discussions. For example, what would your children say if you asked, "Why did the hare think he could get away with sleeping on the side of the road?" Pointing out the connections between the story and your children's own lives is also important. Comparing Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny of Beatrix Potter fame with the rabbit you saw at the pet store, the zoo or in the woods, will help your child distinguish between real and make believe.

Most parents already know that it is important to read to their children. Often the problem is not whether to read, but what to read and when to find the time to read. The available array of childrens' materials is almost overwhelming, but it's easy to get expert advice in your local community. The librarians at your local public library know which books appeal to children at various ages. They probably also conduct a weekly story hour for preschoolers. There are a number of good sourcebooks for parents. These include the American Library Association's *Let's Read Together: Books for Family Enjoyment,*[2] Graves' *The RIF Guide to Encouraging Young Readers,*[3] Kimmel and Segal's *For Reading Out Loud! A Guide to Shar-*

ing Books with Children,[4] Larrick's *A Parent's Guide to Children's Books*,[5] Taylor and Strickland's *Family Storybook Reading*,[6] and Trelease's *Read Aloud Handbook*.[7] You might also consider subscribing to *Why Children's Books?*, a quarterly newsletter put out by The Horn Book, Inc., which has been described as "a happy conversation about wonderful books and children."[8] Parents who do not have ready access to libraries or bookstores can use mail-order book services. For example, *A Child's Collection*[9] is a mail-order catalog of award-winning books for preschoolers. Another excellent source is *Books for Children*[10], a descriptive listing of the best books published in the previous year for preschool through junior high school age children. It is compiled by a panel of experts in children's literature under the guidance of the Children's Literature Center of the Library of Congress.

Not all parents find it easy to schedule a regular time for reading to their children. But you don't always have to be the one to read to your child. In addition to story hours at a library, many community groups organize senior citizen volunteers to read to children. Or, there may be a local Reading is Fundamental (RIF) program in your area.[11] Even closer to home, there may be a relative or friend who would enjoy reading aloud to your children. It is not so much *who* reads with your children but rather that *someone* does it regularly and with joy.

Children get the impression that reading is valuable when they see their parents enjoy and benefit from reading. When parents read newspapers, magazines and books at home, and check out library books for themselves as well as for the children, they set a powerful example and emphasize the importance and pleasure of reading.

Teaching Your Preschoolers about Written Language

When you read to your children, in addition to hearing a story, they almost automatically learn about written language as well. They learn that the words in a particular written story are always in the same order and on the same page. (Can't you just hear your preschoolers telling you that you've read it wrong, that's not the way it goes!) They may also learn that print goes from left to right and that there are spaces between words. These understandings, which will be important when a child begins formal schooling, develop very naturally when the child sits on your lap and follows your finger across the print while you point to the words you say.

In addition, while reading with their children, parents often have opportunities to answer their children's questions about the names and sounds of letters and can easily point out the letters. Preschoolers are very observant and often focus on company trademarks and logos that include or resemble letters of the alphabet. For example, the golden arches at McDonald's look like an M—these days, pointing that out may be an easy way to begin. Television programs like Sesame Street also may help your children learn letters and the sounds they represent. Try to watch these shows with your child so that you can talk to your children about the letters on the screen and point out all the other places those letters appear. Research has shown that children who enter school already knowing the names and sounds of letters do better in learning to read (*BNR*, p. 31).

You may want to initiate a number of the following activities with your children. (Additional activities are included in the sourcebooks listed above.) It is important to remember that if your children are not enjoying a particular activity, stop and try another. It should be fun for all of you. Remember, too, that if your children forget something they knew last week, they aren't failures; that is the nature of young children!

- Preschoolers enjoy *dictating stories* or *journals* to a parent. These can include descriptions of outings and activities the child has enjoyed as well as stories you and your child make up together. They can be illustrated with snap shots or your child's drawings. Mementos such as fall leaves, birthday cards, or movie ticket stubs can also be included. You will probably find that the journal is your child's favorite book.

- Making *lists* for shopping trips. Preschoolers can help by writing the words—with assistance from mom or dad in spelling as well as forming the letters—or drawing a picture of each item. Encourage your children to use what they know about letters and the sounds they stand for to spell as best they can. (Because this may take forever, it's not recommended if you're in a hurry. Your preschoolers, however, are thrilled if they can help you to do something important for the family.)

- *Magnetic letters*, available in most toy stores, can be used to help children spell words and messages. Because the letters will stick to the refrigerator, they may be an ideal thing for your child to use while you are preparing meals.

- A *letter scrapbook* is a long-term project particularly good for rainy days. Begin by labeling each page of a scrapbook with a letter of the alphabet. Provide your children with a supply of old magazines so they can cut out pictures of things that begin with each letter and paste them on the appropriate page. If you label the pictures for them, they will have a handmade picture dictionary.

- Your children would probably like to make *snakey letters* from modeling clay or cookie dough. Begin by rolling out snake-shaped pieces that can be formed into letter shapes. If you are using cookie dough, be sure that enclosed letter shapes, such as "o", "b" or "R" have plenty of space inside the circle, since the circles tend to close up when baked.

The most important thing during the preschool years is for parent and child to enjoy each encounter with reading and writing. Laughing about the mistakes you and your children make will be a better motivator than reprimanding your child for getting it wrong. Enjoy spending time with and informally teaching your children. Research has shown that they learn as much or more from informal activities at home than they do from commercial workbooks parents sometimes buy (*BNR*, p. 24).

Chapter 3

Beginning Reading

Just as children babble before they talk, scribble before they draw, and draw before they write, so they move from just looking at pictures, to paying attention to print, to really reading. It is important to remember that there is no "right" time for children to move from one activity to another. Many reading professionals used to think, based on research done in the 1930s, that children were "ready" to learn to read only when they reached a certain level of maturity, usually around age six and a half. A wealth of more recent research, however, shows that children can benefit from early reading and language instruction in preschool and kindergarten (*BNR*, pp. 28–29).

What to Expect in Good Beginning Reading Programs

Beginning Reading Programs in Kindergarten

To ease the transition from home to school, the Commission advocates a balanced kindergarten program that includes ample experience with oral and printed language, and early opportunities to begin writing. In the ideal program, both formal and informal approaches are used so that instruction is systematic but free from undue pressure (*BNR*, pp. 29–30).

Since reading instruction builds on oral language, good kindergarten programs give children opportunities to talk and listen. Teachers organize discussion groups and encourage children to talk about the stories they have heard and read, so they will learn new words and the habit of talking about their experiences.

Children enjoy hearing their favorite stories read again and again, and often learn these stories by heart even when they cannot actually read the words. This kind of "pretend" reading gives children their first sense of mastering reading. The kindergarten teacher will often copy some of the phrases and sentences from these favorite books onto charts so that children can begin to recognize the words when they see them in other places.

Good kindergarten programs give children opportunities to learn about the different purposes of reading. The purpose of reading a story is to enjoy and understand it. The purpose of traffic signs is to ensure safety. The purpose of directions and news is to inform. Children can enjoy a story, read traffic signs, and be informed by directions and news—all in a single day.

Children in kindergarten and first grade need opportunities to write. When they compose messages to other people, they learn a great deal about the connections between letters and sounds. However, their early writings are likely to contain "invented spellings." For example, children may initially write 't' for the word 'tame'. Several months later this may become 'tm', followed by 'tam', and finally 'tame'. This is a fairly well-documented development. But because children want their readers to understand the message, they will want to learn standard spellings. In this way, children learn more fully that the purpose of reading and writing is to

communicate with others, and they get a practical lesson on the value of the common rules of written language.

Beginning Reading Programs in the First Grade

During first grade, your children will receive formal instruction in reading. One of the major tasks at this stage of a child's development will be to learn how to translate groups of letters into spoken words—sometimes called decoding. Indeed, fast and accurate word identification is one of the cornerstones of skilled reading (*BNR*, p. 11). The question is how best to teach children to decode words.

As William Bennett, the U. S. Secretary of Education, points out, "Research of the past two decades has confirmed what experience and common sense tell us: . . . children learn to read more effectively when they first learn the relationship between letters and sounds. This is known as phonics."[12] In fact, "most reading educators today [agree] that phonics instruction is one of the essential ingredients" for teaching word identification (*BNR*, p. 36). Based on research, the Commission concluded that phonics instruction should start early and, for the most part, should finish by the end of second grade. Teachers should teach phonics and then let children practice using those skills in stories that contain the sounds being taught.

> **The goal of phonics is not that children be able to state the 'rules' governing letter–sound relationships . . . [but] to get across the alphabetic principle, the principle that there are systematic relationships between letters and sounds.** (*BNR*, p. 37)

Although phonics helps children become fast and accurate decoders, good word identification skills are not enough. In good reading programs, opportunities to read worthwhile material go hand in hand with word recognition.

Good beginning reading programs balance the need for reading materials with limited vocabulary and the need to practice word identification with opportunities to hear interesting, exciting stories that use rich language. In addition, such programs give children opportunities to practice letter–sound relationships through writing as well as reading. Although children may continue to use "invented" spellings, as described above, this is a developmental stage children pass through as they learn to master letter–sound relationships.

Helping Your Child Learn to Read

There is no hard and fast boundary between the role of the parent and the role of the teacher in helping children learn to read. When they do learn, they ideally move forward on all fronts at once. They learn that the purpose of reading is to get meaning from the page, not merely to utter the correct sounds; they learn to decode written text and translate it into words and sentences; and they learn the joys of written language. Even if parents are unfamiliar with the technical side of reading instruction, much of what they naturally do with children at home parallels and reinforces good reading instruction.

You can happily share many activities with your children that will reinforce the instruction they receive in school. The things parents are advised to do for their preschoolers continue to be important with kindergartners and first-graders: reading aloud together, going places and doing things that build the child's knowledge of the world, and learning the connections between letters and sounds.

Reading Aloud Together

Reading aloud together continues to be important and useful as your child moves into school. When you read aloud to children, you demonstrate the value of skilled oral reading. You stretch children's understanding of words and ideas when you read stories that are on their interest level but beyond their reading level. If you and your children sit close, they can see the print and the pictures, and you will enjoy a time of closeness and warmth while you encourage their reading development.

Choosing Books: Trips to the library or bookstore can be pleasant outings. Before you go, you may want to ask other parents and children what good books they have read lately. At the library, you can ask the librarian which books are popular with this age group. You can steer your children to the shelves for beginning readers and let them browse through the books. It's good to let your children begin to exercise some choices, but it is also important that the books you will read together are ones you yourself will enjoy reading.

Listening to Your Children Read: It's important for you to read to your children, but equally important that your children have opportunities to read to you. Beginning readers thrive on having someone value their emerging skills. Listening will give you a chance to let them know how proud you are of their new skills. Don't worry if your children make a mistake when the error doesn't change the meaning of the story; just let it go. If the error does change the story, you can either supply the correct word, help them use what they know about letters and sounds, ask them to think of other words with similar spellings, or ask what word might make sense in the story. In any case, have them reread the sentence. This will help to reestablish the sense of the story. Remember, the primary purposes of having your children read aloud to you are to show your appreciation of their new skills, to provide opportunities for them to practice their reading fluency, and, most importantly, to enjoy reading aloud together.

THE REAL
MOTHER
GOOSE

Family Silent Reading

Family silent reading is important too! A family reading hour, when parents can read the newspaper or their favorite magazine or novel and children can read their own books, works well in many homes. In addition to giving everyone a time to read, a family reading hour underscores the importance you attach to reading. Because you value reading, your children will as well. Don't be concerned if your beginning readers choose books that are easier than their school reading books. Practice with easy books will improve reading fluency—an important part of skilled reading.

You might wish to consider subscribing to a children's magazine. Many children get excited by the thrill of getting their own mail. A number of good magazines are available. These include *Cricket,*[13] *The Electric Company, Sesame Street, 3–2–1 Contact,*[14] *Highlights for Children,*[15] *In Your Own Backyard, Ranger Rick,*[16] and *World.*[17] When nothing else is available, encourage your children to read almost any material—comics, advertisements, the children's column in the newspaper, football and baseball cards, or the contest on the back of the cereal box.

Writing at Home

Writing can also be encouraged at home. Chalkboards, a family message board, pen pals, and letters to relatives or friends can be exciting ways to involve your children in writing with a purpose. Ample supplies of paper, pencils, markers, crayons, and the like, when kept within easy reach, are likely to be used. Starting a journal or writing stories together can be fun, particularly if these activities can be shared with a smaller brother, sister, or friend. Your beginning readers and writers can be expected to take more responsibility than when they were preschoolers. You might help by asking questions that help them organize the story, or by responding to questions about letters and spelling. With each effort, your children will be extending their knowledge of how stories are constructed, how words are spelled, and how people communicate through writing.

Television Viewing

Television viewing is often a concern of parents. You should place reasonable limits on TV viewing. Reasonable limits take two forms. First, the Commission suggests that television viewing be limited to 10 hours per week for school-age children. Research has found that more than 10 hours a week has a negative effect on learning. Limiting television viewing frees up time for reading and writing activities. Second, monitor what your children are viewing. Whenever possible, you should watch the programs with your children. When you watch together you can discuss what you have seen. In that way you can help your children better understand the programs. Wildlife, natural history, science and similar programs will serve as valuable background for school. This is especially true when your children have had an opportunity to think and talk about them with you.

Monitoring Your Child's Progress

"Cheerleading" may be the most important role parents have in supporting and encouraging reading and writing development. Parents can stand behind the school's authority by backing up teachers' requests for promptness and diligence in homework. While parents are encouraging good work and positive study habits, they should not forgot to applaud each success. Punishment may work best at discouraging certain behaviors, but it is less effective as a motivator of positive efforts. Children seem more likely to work hard for praise or other appropriate rewards than they are to avoid some punishment, however dreadful.

As your *child's advocate*, you must monitor your child's progress. Although school reading programs differ widely, you should expect clear explanations of the school's and teacher's general reading goals and expectations, as well as specific goals and expectations they have for your child. Any credible beginning reading program will include phonics and interesting stories for the child to read. Most programs will use a nationally published reading series, accompanying workbooks, and tests. Good reading programs make a point of including good children's literature. For example, some reading programs include "versions of Aesop's *Fables*, the Brothers Grimm, and other classics which retain the dramatic qualities of language while coping with limited reading skills."[18] Look for indications that the teacher has your child specifically in mind, understands what your child needs in reading, and has a plan for delivering these things. Then monitor your child's progress through standard channels such as report cards and test results.

If your child is not doing as well as you believe you should expect, you should consider meeting with your child's teacher. A face-to-face meeting at school will give you the opportunity to have the reading program explained to you and to go over your child's classwork with the teacher. You may want to follow up with a note to the teacher summarizing the areas of agreement and the plan agreed upon. If you are still dissatisfied, the next step is the principal, and so on up the chain of authority within the school district. In most cases, however, your child's teacher is likely to have access to special resources, be it a remedial reading teacher, a guidance counselor, or special enrichment materials that will address your child's needs.

At some point you may decide to go outside the school for private help. Reading tutorial resources are widely available. A good place to call for information may be the nearest college or university. Most have reading programs and provide services on a sliding-fee scale. If they do not have a program, they often keep lists of graduate students or teachers interested in tutoring. Once you have selected a tutor or program, monitor it in much the same way you would monitor your child's progress in school. After 6 to 8 weeks, can you see a difference in your child's reading performance? Can the tutor or instructor explain the goals of the program and document the progress your child has made? If the answer to these questions is no, you may need to review the course of action.

As cheerleader and advocate, remember to have faith in your child's ability to learn to read. No matter how long it takes, with very few exceptions, all children can and do learn to read. Children thrive in supportive environments, and if your children get off to a slow start, it may not be because they aren't trying, but because the situation is inappropriate. Look for a program that supports your child's development.

Chapter 4

Developing Readers

Reading instruction should not end when your children can decode words with a fair degree of ease and can understand simple, well-written stories. Once the basic mechanics of reading are mastered, reading becomes an integral part of learning. Children must extend their skill to meet the challenges of subject matter learning. They must develop a variety of strategies that will enable them to learn effectively from text. Good reading programs help students do just that.

What to Expect in Good Developing Reading Programs

Good reading programs emphasize reading and writing. As you walk through the school building, you see displays of book reports or bulletin boards encouraging reading and writing. In addition, the school allocates a good deal of time to reading. Reading and writing activities occur in every classroom and in conjunction with every subject studied.

Good reading programs teach children how to understand and think through what they are reading as well as how to recognize when they do not understand what they have read. Teachers provide direct instruction—teaching students strategies that help them focus on the relevant information, consolidate it, and integrate it with what they already know (*BNR*, p. 72). For example, teachers might model a strategy by talking about the questions they ask themselves while reading. This might include looking at the title and thinking "What could this be about?" Then as they read, they might observe "This is just what I thought the author would say!" or "I disagree with the author."

It is not enough just to tell students how to approach reading. It is also important for students to understand why a particular strategy is used and when to use it. In addition to making sure students know how, when and why to use a strategy, good reading programs give students ample opportunities to practice reading.

For developing readers, opportunities to *practice reading* means that students should be given plenty of time for silent reading. This should include at least two hours a week of independent reading for children as early as the third or fourth grades (*BNR*, p. 82). This opportunity to read gives children a chance to develop reading fluency, enlarge their vocabularies, and learn about sentence structure and literary forms, as well as just learning lots of information about the world around them.

Signs that your child's school promotes independent reading include well-stocked school or classroom libraries. Schools do not necessarily have to own all the books themselves. Many local public library systems have programs that allow schools or teachers to borrow books on a rotating basis. The essential point is that students should have easy access to a wide variety of books and that they be given an opportunity to read with a minimum number of interruptions.

Likewise, good reading programs give students opportunities to write about what they have read. It is not enough to fill in the blanks on worksheets. Students need to organize information gathered from their readings into paragraphs, and reports. They must also go beyond the information given in the text to analyze and criticize what they have read. Writing forces children to crystallize their thoughts in a meaningful way. The emphasis is on actively thinking about what was read, how the information fits together with what the child already knows, and on communicating these thoughts to others.

Reading instruction should not occur just during the reading lesson. Good programs incorporate reading and writing activities in all aspects of their instructional program. Most programs emphasize stories and literature, but informational articles are equally important. Reading science and social studies textbooks gives students a chance to use their reading ability as well as to practice outlining and summarizing as they deal with important but unfamiliar content.

Helping Your Child Succeed in School

You will always play an important role in your child's development. However, with each new stage, the support and help you provide should change.

Research has shown that parents of children who become successful readers do two things: they are involved in school programs and they monitor their children's progress in school. These actions indicate to children that their parents are concerned about and value school achievement. Through action, not just words, these parents reinforce the idea that school is important. For busy parents, there are easy ways to let your child know you care.

Participating in School Activities

Being involved in school activities helps. It is important to come to school and meet with your children's teachers. Some schools now simply send home report cards twice a year but request that parents come in at the other two marking periods. Some schools have orientation meetings at the beginning of the school year. These provide you with an opportunity to meet your children's teachers, to establish a cooperative relationship with them, and to let them know that you would like to be informed if anything of concern should develop. Once school has begun, you can go to school to observe in your children's classes. You might also serve as class parent and go on field trips with the class. Even if you do this only once a year, it makes a big impression on your children. You can also participate in parent–teacher organizations. Their activities might include fundraisers for the school and periodic volunteer work. Many of the activities occur during the evenings or on weekends so that working parents can participate. Your involvement in these activities shows your concern for your children and for the community they are a part of.

All parents receive report cards and results of standardized tests. They provide an opportunity to talk about school, schoolwork, and attitudes toward school with your child. But report cards are sent out only periodically. Day to day, parents can review their children's homework, ask about projects, and help their children structure time. All are examples of monitoring your child's progress.

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Helping with Homework

You can do a number of things in your home as well. Parents can help their children and support the school program by providing regular study times, with no distractions, and quiet places to work. Establishing a routine helps. Remember the ritual of bath and story time with your preschooler? In a similar manner, setting aside a particular time and following a particular routine makes homework and study become a naturally expected part of the day. A time without outside interruptions is essential. Some children do best if they do their homework before dinner, while others prefer after dinner. The time is not important, the regularity is!

Homework and studying involve thinking. Thinking is easiest in a quiet place, away from traffic and interruptions. It need not be elaborate—just a table and chair in a well-lit room will do. But it should be quiet and neat, with enough room to spread out the papers and books. It helps to make sure in advance that the necessary supplies are available. These include pencils, pens, paper, scissors, tape, ruler—stored in a shoe box if need be. Preparing for the expected needs of children will make it easier for them to "get on with it."

Assignments will vary in complexity and length. Often children of any age will be asked to do a long-term project that will be too much work for one night. Because children frequently lack the planning skills to manage long-term work successfully, parents can help them think through how to break a large task into manageable subtasks. Don't do it for your children. Instead talk about what has to be done, how it might be done, and make lists of subtasks, what will be needed at each step, and when they should be done. This will help your children structure what needs to be done and helps them learn how to organize for future assignments.

Coaching may be the most useful way to help your child with homework. The focus in coaching is on accomplishing the homework, not on tutoring or remediation. Let your children talk through the assignment. Let them explain what they think needs to be done, what the answers are, and how they arrived at those answers. Where they aren't clear, or you don't understand, ask them to explain further. In coaching, you do not do the assignment, you guide your children along, helping them to clarify and flesh out their thinking.

Too many students think they have homework only if it is written work to be turned in the next day. If a teacher asks students to write the definitions of some words and turn in the assignment, most students will do it. On the other hand, when a teacher asks students to *study* the definitions of words or *review* a chapter, students often ignore the assignment. If you find that your child only studies the night before a test, you might suggest a brief study period each evening in addition to any written homework assignments. This will be easy if there is routine regular study time. This may make the difference between success and failure over the long haul.

Remember that homework is primarily your children's responsibility. If you find yourself doing your children's homework for them or helping with much of their homework, something is wrong. Talk it over with your children, and if need be with their teachers. Part of what students should learn from homework is to organize their time and to work efficiently without an adult's supervision.

Monitoring Your Child's Progress

If you have monitored your child's progress, you will know whether the school program is meeting your child's needs. If you are in doubt, make an appointment with your child's teacher. Make your concerns known as specifically as possible. If you feel your child needs special services, such as those of a reading specialist, discuss it with the classroom teacher and the principal.

If your child is not getting what you believe is necessary, go outside the school for help—especially when efforts to get the school to respond appropriately have been unsuccessful. If your children have shown persistent difficulty in learning to read, write, or both, you should consider having them fully tested. Try all the possible steps within the system before going outside, but once it becomes clear that school or district personnel cannot or will not help, be sure to go outside. Again, colleges and universities in your area are likely to be of help. School personnel should be able to make recommendations.

Encouraging Reading for Fun

School books are not the be-all and end-all of reading. Encourage reading for the fun of it and as a free-time activity. Most children will learn *how* to read. Whether they *will* read depends in large part upon the encouragement they receive and the example their parents set (*BNR*, p, 26).

A family reading hour is always appropriate. And so is reading aloud. School-age children can appreciate the beauty of language, the poetry of well-phrased ideas.

Trips to the library and, when possible, to bookstores are even more important once your children can read on their own. Providing time for reading at home may mean curtailing television. But the payoff will be gains in reading achievement. One way to provide reading time might be to establish a going-to-bed time and a lights-out time and allow your child to read in between (*BNR*, pp. 26-27).

Your children should be allowed to choose their own books, although you may disapprove of an occasional choice they may make (*BNR*, p. 27). When parents allow children to choose their own reading materials and encourage reading as a leisure time activity, children read more and improve their reading.

The public library is an excellent resource for your children. If they do not already have their own library cards, now is the time to get them. Many librarians are specially trained to help children find books that will appeal to them. Librarians can also help your children learn to locate materials for school research projects. Many families find that setting aside a specific time each week to visit the library provides both parents and children with a recurring adventure they can both look forward to. You may also want to seriously consider giving books or magazine subscriptions as presents. Putting books and reading in this special class of items will reinforce the value you place on reading.

Afterword: Next Steps

> **The more elements of good parenting, good teaching, and good schooling children experience, the greater the likelihood that they will achieve their potential as readers.** (*BNR*, p. 117)

The Commission on Reading was formed to critically review the great mass of research and theory on beginning reading and language comprehension. Their report translates this vast research into ways to improve instruction for all children (*BNR*, p. 123). Only a small part of its wealth of information is covered in these pages.

Becoming a Nation of Readers calls upon us all to actively participate in creating a literate society. Parents, teachers, school personnel, and policymakers each have different but very complimentary roles that will help us reach that goal. Parents, however, have what may be the most crucial role.

Becoming a Nation of Readers calls upon parents to

> **lay the foundation for learning to read . . . [by] informally teaching preschool children about reading and writing by reading aloud to them, discussing stories and events, encouraging them to learn letters and words and teaching them about the world around them . . . . In addition to laying a foundation, parents need to facilitate the growth of their children's reading by taking them to libraries, encouraging reading as a free time activity and supporting homework.** (BNR, p. 57)

This is only a part of the picture. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* calls for "preschool and kindergarten reading readiness programs [that] focus on reading, writing, and oral language." (*BNR*, p. 117)

Becoming a Nation of Readers recommends that teachers

- maintain classrooms that are both stimulating and disciplined (*BNR*, p. 118);
- present well-designed phonics instruction when teaching beginning reading (*BNR*, p. 118);
- devote more time to comprehension instruction, and assign fewer workbooks and skillsheets (*BNR*, p. 119); and
- structure lessons so that students spend more time in independent reading and writing (*BNR*, p. 119).

Becoming a Nation of Readers calls for publishers to publish

- reading primers that are interesting, comprehensible, and give children opportunities to apply phonics (*BNR*, p. 118); and
- textbooks that contain adequate explanations of important concepts (*BNR*, p. 119).

Becoming a Nation of Readers asks that schools

- cultivate an ethos that supports reading (*BNR*, p. 119);
- maintain well-stocked and -managed libraries (*BNR*, p. 119);
- introduce more comprehensive assessments of reading and writing (*BNR*, p. 120);
- attract and hold more able teachers (*BNR*, p. 120); and
- provide for the continuing professional development of teachers (*BNR*, p. 120).

Finally, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* calls for lengthening and improving teacher education programs (*BNR*, p. 120).

The full report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, provides the larger perspective by describing how teachers, principals, and communities can make our Nation a nation of readers. To order the full report, see the order form at the back of this booklet.

For More Information

For further information, you may wish to contact the following organizations. Each sponsors a group or offers publications especially for parents. Some do both.

Action for Children's Television (ACT)
20 University Road
Cambridge, MA 02138

American Federation of Teachers
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20001

American Library Association
50 E. Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611

Association for Childhood Education International
11141 Georgia Avenue, Suite 200
Wheaton, MD 20902

Association for Children with Learning Disabilities
4156 Library Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15234

Children's Book Council, Inc.
67 Irving Place
New York, NY 10003

Children's Literature Center of the Library of Congress
1st Street and Independence Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20001

Children's Radio Theatre
1314 14th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20005

Foundation for Children with Learning Disabilities
99 Park Avenue, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10016

International Reading Association
P. O. Box 8139
800 Barksdale Road
Newark, DE 19714

National Association for the Education of Young Children
1834 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20009
800 424-2460

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road
Urbana, IL 61801

National Education Association
1201 16th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036

National Parents and Teachers Association
700 N. Rush Street
Chicago, IL 60611

Parents Choice Foundation
Box 185
Newton, MA 02168

Reading Is Fundamental, Inc. (RIF)
P.O. Box 23444
Washington, DC 20026

United States Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20208

Notes

1. U.S. Department of Education, *What Works: Research about Teaching and Learning*, March 1986; and William J. Bennett, *First Lessons: A Report on Elementary Education in America*, United States Department of Education, September 1986.
2. Association for Library Service to Children, *Let's Read Together: Books for Family Enjoyment*, American Library Association, 4th ed., Chicago, IL, 1981.
3. Ruth Graves, editor, *The RIF Guide to Encouraging Young Readers*, Doubleday & Co., Inc., Garden City, NY, 1987.
4. Margaret M. Kimmel and Elizabeth Segal, *For Reading Out Loud! A Guide to Sharing Books with Children*, Delacorte, 1983; Dell, New York, NY, 1984.
5. Nancy Larrick, *A Parent's Guide to Children's Reading*, Westminster, 5th ed., Philadelphia, PA, 1983.
6. Taylor & Strickland, *Family Storybook Reading*, Heineman, New York, NY, 1986.
7. Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, Penguin, rev. ed., New York, NY, 1985.
8. The Horn Book, Inc., 31 St. James Avenue, Dept. HB, Boston, MA 02116-4167, telephone 800-325-1170.
9. A Child's Collection can be reached at 611 Broadway, Department 708, New York, NY 10012 or call 1-800-652-2665.
10. Copies available for $1.00 each through the Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, Colorado 81009.
11. For information on local programs or how to start one, contact Reading is Fundamental, Inc., (RIF), P.O. Box 23444, Washington, DC 20026.
12. Bennett, *First Lessons*, p. 22.
13. *Cricket*, a literary magazine for children aged 6–12, is available from Open Court Publishing Co., P.O. Box 100, LaSalle, IL 61301.
14. *Sesame Street*, for children ages 2–6, *The Electric Company*, for children in grades 1–3, and *3–2–1 Contact*, for children in grades 3–5, are available from the Children's Television Network, 1 Lincoln Plaza, New York, NY 10023.
15. *Highlights*, for children aged 2–12, is available from Box 269, Columbus, OH 43272.
16. *In Your Own Backyard*, for preschoolers, and *Ranger Rick*, for children in grades K–3, are available from the National Wildlife Federation at 1412 16th Street NW., Washington, DC 20036.
17. *World*, for children in grades 2–4, is available from the National Geographic Society at 17th and M Streets NW., Washington, DC 20036.
18. Bennett, *First Lessons*, p. 23.

To order the full report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*, please fill out the order form below:

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What Parents Can Do
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Pueblo, CO 81009

To order packages of 10 booklets, write to the following address for an order form and price:

Reading Marketing Dept.
D.C. Heath and Company
95 Hayden Avenue
Lexington, MA 02173

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